



File Code: 1920-2

Date: March 23, 2010

Dear Interested Party:



The Malheur, Umatilla, and Wallowa-Whitman National Forests, collectively referred to as the Blue Mountains national forests, are revising our Land Management Plans (LMPs). The project area consists of all National Forest System lands within the Malheur (including those portions of the Ochoco National Forest administered by the Malheur), Umatilla and Wallowa-Whitman National Forests' administrative boundaries, with the exception of Hells Canyon National Recreation Area. The Hells Canyon National Recreation Area Comprehensive Management Plan was revised in 2003 and is incorporated without change into the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest Land Management Plan.

Background

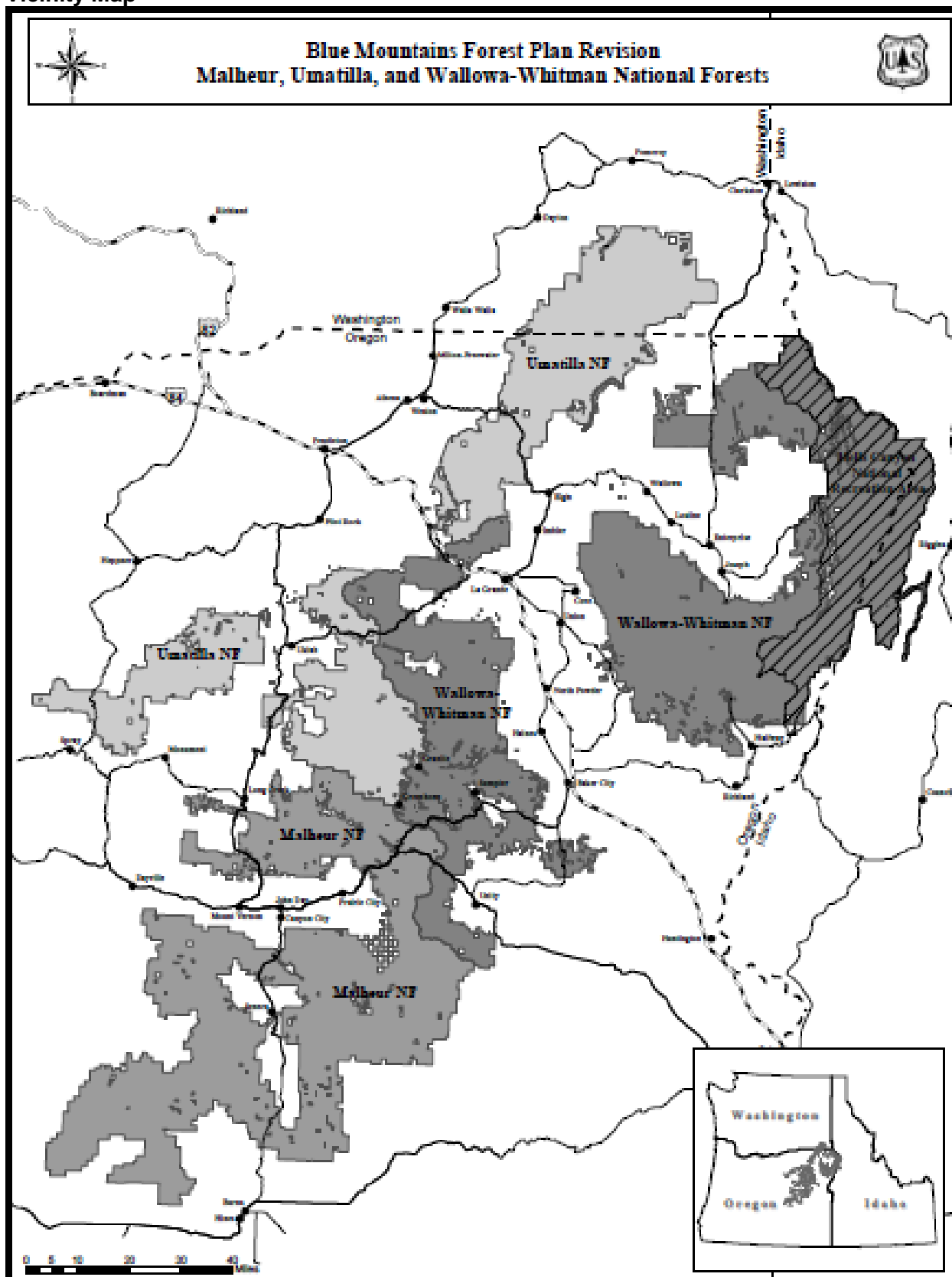
The National Forest Management Act (NFMA) of 1976 requires national forests to revise their plans every 10 to 15 years or when the conditions within the plan area have changed significantly. The forest plans for the three Blue Mountains national forests were each approved in 1990. The Blue Mountains national forests began the formal process of plan revision when the Notice of Intent was published in the *Federal Register* in 2003. The Blue Mountains Forest Plan revision team, an interdisciplinary team of resource specialists, conducted extensive analysis and public collaboration efforts to develop the proposed action. These three national forest land management plans are being analyzed together by one interdisciplinary team because of our common issues, resources, users, and interested individuals and groups. NFMA requires each national forest to have its own land management plan, so the final product will be one plan for each of the Blue Mountains national forests.

The revision process for the Blue Mountains national forests has been conducted under various planning rules since 2003. Most recently, the revision process was guided by the 2008 planning rule. On June 30, 2009 the Forest Service was enjoined by the Federal District Court for the Northern District of California from continued implementation of the 2008 planning rule. In that ruling the Court allowed the Forest Service to choose either to reinstate the 2000 planning rule or the 1982 planning rule. The Forest Service has chosen to implement the transition language from the 2000 planning rule, which allows us to continue planning using the planning provisions from the 1982 rule. The Blue Mountains plan revision process will be completed using the 1982 provisions as provided for in the 2000 planning rule.

While forest plans provide the strategic framework for management of the national forests, there are many other laws and regulations that apply to forest management. These other laws and regulations must be complied with and are not generally stated in the forest plan.



Vicinity Map



Public Involvement

Since the revision effort began in 2003, the Plan Revision Team has held over 35 community workshops and 3 field trips. These workshops were held across northeastern Oregon and southeastern Washington, from Burns, Oregon to Pasco, Washington, and in Portland, Oregon. In addition, the county commissioners from the affected counties convened a group to work with the revision team in the development of the revised forest plans. This group has met at least 15 times since 2003. The revision team has also met with American Indian Tribes, Oregon and Washington state agencies, congressional staffers, conservation groups, and representatives of industry. Formal consultation with Tribes is ongoing.

Purpose

The purpose of this action is to revise the land management plans for the Malheur, Umatilla, and Wallowa-Whitman National Forests as required by NFMA. The revised forest plans will be designed to meet the legal requirements of NFMA and to include new scientific knowledge as it applies to natural resource management. These revised forest plans describe the strategic, program-level guidance for the future management of the Blue Mountains national forests and their natural resources.

Need

Economic, social, and ecological conditions have changed in the 20-year period since the Forest Plans were signed; new laws, regulations and policies are in place; and new information based on monitoring and scientific research is available. The Malheur, Umatilla, and Wallowa-Whitman National Forests are revising their 1990 Forest Plans to meet the legal requirements of the National Forest Management Act (NFMA) of 1976; to address changed conditions and provide consistent management direction (as appropriate) across the three national forests; to incorporate changes in law, regulation, and policy; and to utilize new scientific information. In particular, the interdisciplinary planning team intends to address the following areas in the revised forest plans:

1. To more adequately protect terrestrial plant and animal species and their habitats.

Two objectives in the Strategic Plan for the Forest Service are to “provide ecological conditions to sustain viable populations of native and desired nonnative species and to achieve objectives for management indicator and focal species.” The Columbia Basin Strategy (2000) identifies key elements to be addressed in planning efforts, such as source habitats, that are not addressed in the 1990 forest plans. The structural arrangement of vegetation, both vertical and horizontal, and the size and arrangement of trees, grasses, and shrubs are important components of wildlife habitat. Many changes to forest stand structure have occurred due to disturbances such as fire, timber harvest, and insects and disease. There has been a loss of large (20 inches DBH and greater) and medium (15 to 20 inches DBH) trees across the landscape. Dry old forest single-story has been greatly reduced from pre-1900 levels. Some of the most significant changes in forested structural stages have occurred in the dry forest environment. All of these changes have led to reductions in habitat for some species and increases for others. The 1990 forest plans need to be updated to reflect current science relating to plant and animal species and their habitats.

2. To address management of fuels and fire risk.

Changing vegetative conditions have made forests more susceptible to disturbances, such as uncharacteristically severe fires, insects and disease. Several factors have contributed to the changes, including the cumulative effects of a periodic and sometimes extended drought, climate change, increasing vegetative density, shifts in forest species composition, and modified landscape patterns. Forested areas on the three national forests are dominated by dense, multi-layered conifer stands with tree species that are not well suited for the area.

The 1990 forest plan standards and guidelines do not adequately address the multiple factors that have created the existing uncharacteristic conditions nor do they adequately address the varied nature of the landscape. Neither do they address the need for management strategies that recognize the unique qualities of various landscapes. An integrated strategy that recognizes multiple risk factors and addresses variability in conditions and site potentials is needed.

3. **To more adequately protect watersheds and aquatic habitats.** The Columbia Basin Strategy (2000) emphasizes restoring the processes responsible for creating and maintaining aquatic and riparian habitats and restoring naturally functioning riparian ecosystems. It also outlines specific components to be included in revised forest plans. The 1990 forest plans include, by amendment, interim direction (i.e., PACFISH, INFISH, and the Eastside Screens) for management of threatened or endangered fish species. However, the 1990 plan language was never changed to integrate this interim direction or resolve conflicts between the existing plan language and the interim direction language. The 1990 forest plans do not adequately provide integrated management strategies for maintenance and restoration of properly functioning watersheds that provide a range of benefits on and off the national forests. These include, but are not limited to, providing habitat for terrestrial, aquatic, and riparian-dependent species; maintaining water quality; providing channel stability; reducing erosion; moderating floods; and maintaining reliable stream flows for downstream users.
4. **To address climate change.** The 1990 forest plans do not address climate change. Climate change is expected to affect plant species range and composition and alter competitive relationships between plant species. Changes in the composition and structure of plant communities will, in turn, alter the character and distribution of wildlife habitats. Future conditions may be more favorable to some undesired non-native plant and animal species. The full extent of changes in response to climate change on natural resources in the Blue Mountains is uncertain, but integrated management direction is needed to maintain or increase the resilience of the national forests in the face of these changes.
5. **To recognize the interdependency of social and economic components with national forest management.** The relationship between the national forests and the people who live, work, and play in them is not adequately recognized in the 1990 forest plans. National forests provide a variety of recreation opportunities, work opportunities, and opportunities to exercise cultural and spiritual traditions. Local communities provide infrastructure that contributes to the ability of the national forests to restore and maintain ecological systems. Recognizing the mutual benefits of the relationships between social and economic components and the national forests is important to providing integrated management direction.

Proposed Action

The proposed changes to the Forest Plans in response to the purpose and need include:

- goals/desired conditions;
- objectives;
- forest-wide standards and guidelines;
- management area desired conditions, standards, and guidelines;
- suitability of lands for uses and activities;
- monitoring and evaluation requirements; and
- recommendations made for special areas, such as Research Natural Areas, or areas that can only be designated by statute, such as Wilderness.

Goals/desired conditions provide a description of desired outcomes of forest management. Objectives provide projections of measurable outcomes intended to promote achievement of Forest Plan goals/desired conditions. Forest-wide standards and guidelines provide management direction and guidance that is applicable across each national forest. Management area desired conditions, standards, and guidelines provide direction that applies to specific geographic areas within the three national forests. Identification of characteristics of lands for specific uses and activities provides integration between particular uses and desired conditions and objectives for areas on the National Forest. Monitoring and evaluation indicates whether areas are trending toward goals/desired conditions so that needed adjustments can be made in the future. Special areas are places or areas within the National Forest System designated because of their unique or special characteristics. Some can be designated by the responsible official, such as a Botanical Area. Others, such as Wilderness or Wild and Scenic River designations, are recommended for designation by the responsible official, but congressional action is needed in order to make the designation.

The proposed action includes management direction for Inventoried Roadless Areas (IRAs) identified in the 2001 Roadless Area Conservation Rule (RACR). There is currently a legal dispute regarding the status of the RACR, with two Federal courts having issued conflicting rulings. Pending resolution of that legal question, the proposed action includes plan direction that retains the undeveloped character of the three national forests by including Management Areas that restrict road construction and timber harvest. This is based on analyses completed to date and public involvement. The decision for the final plan will consider further analyses and public comments. The decision for the final plan will be consistent with the legal status of the RACR at the time the plan is signed.

As important as the decisions to be made is the identification of the types of decisions that will not be made within the revised forest plan. The authorization of project-level activities on the forests is not a decision made in the forest plan but occurs through subsequent project specific decision-making. The designation of routes, trails, and areas for motorized vehicle travel are not considered during plan revision. Some issues (e.g., hunting regulations), although important, are beyond the authority or control of the national forests and will not be considered. In addition, some issues, such as wild and scenic river suitability determinations, may not be undertaken at this time, but addressed later as a future forest plan amendment. The Hells Canyon National Recreation Area (HCNRA), administered by the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest, is managed under the HCNRA Comprehensive Management Plan, a part of the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest land management plan. The HCNRA Comprehensive Management Plan was revised in 2003 and is not being considered for modification in this revision process.

This proposed action does not identify management indicator species (MIS); their selection for this proposed action is still being considered. A placeholder for MIS is in the monitoring elements (table 34). MIS will be identified for each alternative before the effects of each alternative have been analyzed. The monitoring elements in the proposed action currently include only those required by the planning rule. Additional monitoring elements will be developed for each alternative. The entire proposed action, along with the glossary and references, can be found on the Blue Mountains Forest Plan Revision website: http://www.fs.fed.us/r6/uma/blue_mtn_planrevision/.

Public Meeting Dates

Public meetings to discuss the forest planning process and this proposed action will be held on the following dates and locations:

April 6, 2010 5:00 p.m. Federal Building, 431 Patterson, John Day, Oregon
 April 7, 2010 5:00 p.m. Harney County Senior Center, 17 S Alder, Burns, Oregon
 April 13, 2010 5:00 p.m. Pendleton Convention Center, Rooms 3 & 4, 1601 Westgate, Pendleton, Oregon
 April 14, 2010 5:00 p.m. St. Patrick Senior Center, 182 N. Main, Heppner, Oregon
 April 15, 2010 5:00 p.m. Public Use Building, 1 N. Pine, Dayton, Washington
 April 20, 2010 5:00 p.m. Sunridge Inn, One Sunridge Lane, Baker City, Oregon
 April 21, 2010 5:00 p.m. Eastern Oregon University, One University Blvd, Hoke Hall, Room 309, La Grande, Oregon
 April 22, 2010 5:00 p.m. Civic Center, 102 E 1st St., Joseph, Oregon
 April 28, 2010 5:00 p.m. Red Lion Hotel Portland Convention Center, 1021 NE Grand Avenue, Portland, Oregon
 April 29, 2010 5:00 p.m. Franklin County Public Utility District Auditorium, 1411 West Clark, Pasco, Washington

Comments

This revised forest plan proposed action is a proposal and not a decision. This proposal and your comments provide a basis for the development and evaluation of issues and alternatives. The scoping period runs for 60 days from the date of publication in the Federal Register. Although comments are welcome at any time, they are most helpful to us if received early. I encourage you to return your comments by May 25, 2010.

Comments which are most meaningful and will be of the greatest help to the Forest Plan Revision Team are those which address strategic direction for each National Forest, or what the Forests should look like or provide for in the future. Comments that are directed towards very specific areas or projects may be outside the scope of forest plans.

Written comments should be addressed to the Blue Mountains Forest Plan Revision Team, P.O. Box 907, Baker City, OR, 97814. If you have any questions, additional information can be provided by Katie Countryman, Team Leader, at (541) 523-1264.

Comments can also be sent via email to: blue_mtn_planrevision@fs.fed.us. Comments that you provide on this project will become a matter of public record.

Sincerely,

/s/Steven A. Ellis
 STEVEN A. ELLIS
 Forest Supervisor
 Wallowa-Whitman National Forest

/s/Kevin D. Martin
 KEVIN D. MARTIN
 Forest Supervisor
 Umatilla National Forest

/s/Doug Gochnour
 DOUG GOCHNOUR
 Forest Supervisor
 Malheur National Forest

Enclosure

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